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AUTHOR Weathers, Pamela L.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature identified factors and methods that affect survey response rates. A set of procedures was identified as having varying degrees of positive impact on return rates to mail questionnaires (e.g., prenotification, personalization of the cover letter, inclusion of university sponsorship of the research, i.e., letterhead, and inclusion of the date when the actual questionnaire would be mailed). A worksheet was developed to summarize and critique the specific research methods employed by investigators conducting mail surveys as reported in the Journal of Counseling Psychology (JCP) from January 1980 through December 1989. Forty studies using mail survey procedures were identified. Each of the articles was reviewed to gather detailed information about specific procedures used in the study. To better understand how researchers actually conducted their studies, a questionnaire was developed to ascertain if (and how) various survey design procedures were used. Thirty-one authors, representing 34 JCP studies, completed surveys for a response rate of 85%. Only two of these studies referred to mail survey methodological literature to support design considerations. Counseling researchers appear to rely upon professional custom, not empirical research, when designing mail surveys and this circumstance makes these studies vulnerable to internal and external validity criticisms. The results of this study indicate that counseling researchers need to continue to incorporate empirically-based mail survey methods into studies, thereby enhancing the internal and external validity of their studies. (ABL)

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Mail Survey Research In Counseling Psychology: Current Practice and Suggested Guidelines

Pamela L. Weathers Michael J. Furlong Debra Solórzano
University of California Santa Barbara
Department of Education

RUNNING HEAD: MAIL SURVEYS: PRACTICE AND GUIDELINES

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Abstract

A review of the literature identified factors and methods that affect survey response rates. A set of procedures was identified as having varying degrees of positive impact on return rates to mail questionnaires (e.g., prenotification, personalization of the cover letter, inclusion of university sponsorship of the research (letterhead), and inclusion of date when the actual questionnaire would be mailed). A worksheet was developed to summarize and critique the specific research methods employed by investigators conducting mail surveys as reported in the Journal of Counseling Psychology (JCP) from January 1980 through December 1989. Forty studies using mail survey procedures were identified. Each of the articles was reviewed to gather detailed information about specific procedures used in the study. To better understand how researchers actually conducted their studies, a questionnaire was developed to ascertain if (and how) various survey design procedures were used. Thirty-one authors, representing 34 JCP studies completed surveys for a response rate of 85.0%. Only two of these studies referred to mail survey methodological literature to support design considerations. Counseling researchers appear to rely upon professional custom, not empirical research, when designing mail surveys and this circumstance makes these studies vulnerable to internal and external validity criticisms. Recommendations for counseling researchers who use mail survey methodology are provided.

Conducting Mail Surveys In Counseling Psychology: Current Practice and Suggested Guidelines

Scientific disciplines over time can demonstrate a subtle drift in methodological procedures which potentially can bias research findings. This is particularly true of disciplines such as Counseling Psychology which often draw upon other scientific disciplines for developments in research paradigms. A case in point involves the use of mail survey procedures to gather data. Other than Hackett's (1981) and Heppner, Kiulighan, & Wampold's (1992) discussions of the advantages and limitations of survey research methodology, no empirical studies have critically examined how counseling researchers use mail surveys or how they can improve research designs using this methodology. This circumstance is true even though survey research is the most widely used method of data collection in the social sciences (Hackett, 1981). Of the many design and data collection considerations in survey research, response rate is a critical factor for both generalization of results and representativeness of the sample. There are empirically validated procedures designed to improve the quality and response rate of surveys (Heberlein and Baumgartner, 1978; Lockhart, 1984). It is important to determine what indication, if any, we have that counseling research has used these empirically vaildated procedures, thereby addressing questions raised by Hackett over a

decade ago?

Meta-Analyses of Mail Survey Procedures

Although counseling psychologists have not systematically engaged in a looking-glass-self analysis of their standards for conducting mail surveys, researchers in allied professional fields, Social Psychology, Sociology, and Marketing, have addressed some of these issues and provide perspectives on procedures that enhance this methodology. Empirically validated factors that affect responses to surveys have been summarized and included in three meta-analyses.

Heberlein and Baumgartner (1978) examined factors that affect response rates to mail questionnaires and found that 51% of the variance in the final response rate was associated with salience of the topic to the respondent and the number of follow-up contacts. Other factors such as government or organization sponsorship, length of questionnaire, and telephone contact on the third follow-up affected the final response rate independently of the number of contacts and the salience of the topic. The results of a regression equation predicting the final response rate indicated that high response rates are achievable by 1) manipulating the costs of responding, 2) the perceived importance of the research and 3) personalized contact.

Armstrong and Lusk (1987) were also interested in factors that influence response rate and conducted a meta-analysis of return postage used in mail surveys. They report that first-class postage yields an additional 9% increase over business reply postage, making it more

cost effective. Commemorative stamps produced a small increase that was not statistically significant; however, they concluded that commemorative stamps, or a set of smaller denomination stamps on the return envelope, should be used to obtain the maximum return rate. A number of hypotheses were discussed in an attempt to explain why postage stamps result in increased response rates. According to self-interest hypothesis, supplying stamped enveloped enables individuals to act in their own best interest by reducing the time and costs involved in completing and returning the questionnaire. Finally, the personalization hypothesis suggests that regular and commemorative postage stamps increase the amount of personal attention and therefore the importance given to each individual respondent.

A recent meta-analysis completed by Fox, Crask and Kim (1988), identified selected techniques that encourage individuals to respond to mail surveys. They found that prenotification had the most positive effect on return rates followed in decreasing order of effect by follow-ups, outgoing first-class postage, university sponsorship, monetary incentives, and paper color of the questionnaire. These factors appear to influence response rate because collectively they establish the legitimacy of the survey and convey the respect the researcher has for each potential respondent.

Purpose of the Study

The essential goals of survey research are to adequately define the

target population to be surveyed, develop an unbiased sampling procedure that selects individuals to receive the mail survey, design a valid questionnaire, and establish a set of procedures to contact these individuals that produces a high response rate (Heppner et al., 1992). The closer a study approaches this ideal outcome, the greater confidence the researcher has in the external validity of the study. When less than 100% response rates are obtained, as will almost always be the case, researchers are faced with the task of evaluating potential bias in the final sample -- were those who responded and those who did not respond similar on characteristics critical to the population being sampled (Heppner et al., 1992)? Without such an analysis the representativeness of the final sample is in question.

Given the critical role response rate palys in survey research, the purposes of this study are as follows:

1. To carefully examine the methodological characteristics of studies using mail surveys procedures that have been published in the counseling field.

2. To examine how counseling researchers have used empirically-based survey methods in the time since Hackett (1981) formally introduced the counseling field to survey research procedures.

Methods

Participants

We selected studies published in the Journal of Counseling Psychology (JCP) as being representative of empirical counseling

research. The 1980-1989 ICP volumes were reviewed to identify those studies that used mail surveys as the primary data collection procedure. The sample consisted of 40 studies completed by 37 primary researchers (three researchers each had two mail survey studies published in ICP during this time period).

An initial review of the orginal manuscripts inidcated that they did not provide description with sufficient detail to identify the specific mail survey procedures incorporated into the research protocols. For this reason, it became necessary for us to contact the authors and seek additional information about the mail survey methodology used in their studies.

Survey Procedures

Our mail survey included the following components: 1) prenotification letter, 2) questionnaire with cover letter, 3) follow-up letter #1 with questionnaire, 4) follow-up #2 consisting of multiple phone contacts with nonrespondents, 5) follow-up #3 consisting of cover letter, questionnaire, and phone contact with those who we subsequently learned had not received the initial mailing, 6) follow-up letter #4 informing all 40 authors that a summary would be mailed to them (completion of the questionnaire was not a condition for receiving the study summary).

Survey Instruments

Prenotification Letter. A prenotification letter was developed and independently rated by 10 doctoral students and faculty from an APA-

approved counseling psychology program. The raters evaluated the cover letter for overall appearance, ease of reading, appropriateness of length, and the likelihood that they would respond to the survey if they actually had received it. Comments and suggestions from this rating process were used to improve the format and quality of the letter.

Survey Questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed using a modification of the Total Design Method (Babbie, 1990; Dillman, 1978). Particular attention was paid to format, length, and ease of completing the questionnaire. It was decided that each questionnaire would include a personalized cover letter, which listed the title of the ICP mail survey study in question. Following the cover letter were three pages of questions presented in a two-column format with space for comments at the end. The questionnaire therefore was four pages, back-to-back on a folded sheet of 8.5 by 17-inch lavender paper. Finally, the questionnaire was independently evaluated by six graduate students from an APA-approved counseling psychology program and revised to incorporate their comments and suggestions.

Follow-up Letter. The first follow-up letter reminded the authors that a questionnaire had been sent to them six-weeks previously and indicated that their questionnaire had not been received. They were requested to complete the copy of the questionnaire accompanying the follow-up letter. The reference of their ICP mail survey study was given again. A telephone number was provided so that they could

request information if needed.

Mailing of Questionnaire. The questionnaires were mailed unfolded in manila envelopes in February 1991, one month after mailing the prenotification letter. A stamped, addressed return envelope was included for the respondent's convenience.

Six weeks (April, 1991) after the initial questionnaire was mailed (approximately 50% of the surveys were returned by this time) another copy of the questionnaire was mailed to nonrespondents. A stamped, self-addressed return envelope was also included with the follow-up letter and questionnaire.

Approximately five weeks (May, 1991) after the first follow-up mailing we telephoned nonrespondents as a second follow-up contact. As a result of these phone calls, one author requested a third copy of the questionnaire.

After making at least four phone calls to the unaccounted-for nonrespondents, a message was left for them indicating that if they did not respond, we would assume that they did not wish to complete the questionnaire.

The original questionnaire cover letter promised to send the authors a copy of the survey results in June, 1991. However, responses were still arriving in mid-June, 1991. As a result, a letter was sent to all 37 primary authors in the original sample indicating that a summary paper would be available in August. After sending out this fourth follow-up letter, we received two additional questionnaires.

These efforts resulted in receipt of usable questionnaires from 31 of 37 (83.8%) of the authors. The three authors who published two mail submitted surveys for each of their studies, so the final sample includued 34 studies. This survey protocol resulted in the following response rates by article: 1) usable returns (85.0%); 2) unusable returns (2.4%); 3) overt refusal (7.3%); 4) did not respond (4.9%); 5) and unable to locate (2.4%).

Results

This review of JCP studies using mail survey procedures showed that counseling researchers have used a variety of techniques to enhance their designs; however, the knowledge base upon which methodology decisions are made was indiscernible. Of the 925 references cited in the 40 JCP mail survey studies published between 1980 and 1989 there were only two methodological citations. These citations were made in two different studies and both referred to the Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978) of conducting mail surveys. No references were made to Hackett's (1981) article on survey research methods. A summary of the survey results is presented in Table 1. The discussion in the following section focuses on personalization, follow-ups, postage, and use of incentives.

Insert table 1 about here

Personalization

Prenotification of Respondents. A majority of the studies (57.5%) did not include prenotification procedures. Of those studies that did use prenotification procedures, about one-fourth (27.2%) used a prenotification letter, two (6.0%) used a personal phone call, two (6.0%) used a post card, one (3.0%) used a phone call plus face-to-face contact, and one (3.0%) used a phone call and letter.

Design of Cover Letter. A majority of the authors (84.8%) reported using some form of personalization of the questionnaire cover letter. Individually addressing the letter (72.7%) was the most frequently used form of personalization followed by researcher signature in ink (66.7%) and an individually typed cover letter (33.3%).

Almost all authors (96.9%) reported using some form of special appeal in their cover letters. The most popular forms of appeal were to indicate that the individual's responses would be anonymous (78.7%) and confidential (69.6%). Other forms of appeal included statements regarding university sponsorship of the survey (45.4%) and notification of a cutoff date to return the questionnaire (30.3%).

Only a few authors (12.1%) included some form of minimal request by asking the respondents to answer a basic set of demographic questions or return the blank questionnaire.

Design and Topic of Questionnaire. There was no apparent central focus to the topics investigated using mail survey procedures. About one-third (36.3%) of the studies fell in a miscellaneous category with

21.2% addressing career counseling, 18.1% supervision and training, 12.1% cross-cultural counseling, and 12.1% stress/anxiety issues.

Nearly 9 out of 10 authors (84.8%) indicated that the questionnaires used in their studies were printed on 8.5 x 11-inch paper. One questionnaire each was printed on 11 x 17-inch paper (3.0%), 5 x 8-inch paper (3.0%), and 4.25 by 5.5- inch (8.5 x 11-inch folded in half; 3.0%) paper. A majority of the questionnaires (66.7%) were printed on white paper with 8.8% on yellow paper, 3.0% on green paper, and 21.2% using a multi-color format. The questionnaires ranged in length from 1 to 16 pages with a median length of 4.5 pages. Nearly one-half (47.1%) of the questionnaires were four to six pages in length.

Follow-up Contacts

Form of follow-up. A letter was the most common form of follow-up (45.4%), followed by sending a second copy of the questionnaire (42.4%), telephone contacts at (39.3%), post cards (33.3%), and face-to-face contacts (6.0%).

Number and timing of follow-ups. The majority (90.9%) of the studies used one or more follow-up contacts. Two follow-up contacts were used in about one-half (45.4%) of the studies followed by a single follow-up (27.2%) and three follow-ups (15.1%). With respect to timing, in more than one-third of the studies (36.3%) there were two weeks between the initial mailing of the questionnaire and the follow-up contact. Relatively fewer studies had long (one month or more; 27.2%) or very brief (one week or less; 11.9%) time spans between the

initial mailing and the first follow-up contact.

Postage and Mailing of Questionnaires

Form of Original Mailing. Many studies used regular postage stamps (39.3%) to mail the original survey. Other forms of postage included metered mail (24.2%), bulk rate mail (15.1%), and commemorative stamps (6.0%). In nearly one-half of the studies, the survey was mailed in an envelope using address labels that were individually typed. The remaining studies used address labels that were handwritten (12.1%) or computer generated (21.2%).

Return Envelope and Postage. The type of return envelope used was split evenly between "business reply" envelopes (42.4%) and regular envelopes with a postage stamp attached (45.4%). Only 6.0% of the studies used commemorative stamps on the return envelope.

Incentives

The vast majority (81.8%) of the studies did not offer money or other gifts to the respondents as an incentive. In those studies which used an incentive, almost all were limited to sharing the results of the study with respondents (18.1%). One study (3.0%) included a monetary incentive (amount unspecified), and another study used (3.0%) a lottery prize format.

Size of the Original Samples

The sizes of the original samples drawn by the ICP researchers ranged from 39 to 4,097 with a median of 300. Approximately one out of four studies had sample sizes of 155 or less (24.2%) and approximate

three out of four studies (75.7%) had sample sizes of 646 or less. Only five studies (15.1%) had samples sizes greater than 1000.

Response Rate

The researchers were asked to provide information about 1) usable returns, 2) overt refusals, 3) non-responses, and 4) the number of those in the original sample that were unaccounted for. Only information about the final usable response rate was reported with sufficient frequency to merit reporting here.

The final usable response rates ranged from a low of 27.0% to a high of 89.7%. The median response rate across all 33 studies was 63.7%. The highest frequency (30.3%) of final usable response rates fell in the 70-79% range with an additional 24.2% of the studies having return rates in the 60-69% range. A sizeable minority of the studies reported return rates in the 40-49% range (15.1%) and the 50-59% range (15.1%). Three studies (9.9%) had final response rates below 40.0%.

Quality Indicators and Response Rates

To evaluate the relationship between the survey design procedures used in these ICP studies and final useable response rate, a quality index was calculated. Meta-analyses have found the following procedures to be important: prenotification, personalization, minimum requests, first-class postage on out-going and return mailings, and the use of an incentive (Armstrong and Lusk, 1987; Fox, crask and Kim, 1988; Heberlein and Baumgartner, 1978). Therefore, each study was give one point for each of the following procedures

included in the research design: 1) use of prenotification, 2) personalization of the cover letter, 3) including some form of request for minimum response, 4) carrying out two or more follow-up contacts, 5) use of colored paper, 6) first-class postage stamp on outgoing mail, 7) first-class postage stamp on return mail, and 8) use of some form of incentive. In addition, studies were given up to an additional two points if they used commemorative stamps on the ongoing and return mail. This index ranged from 0-10. The mean quality score across the studies was only 2.9 (SD = 1.7). The correlation of this index with final usable response rate was positive but nonsignificant ($r = .246$, $p > .05$).

Discussion

This study examined procedures used in ICP mail survey studies published during the 1980's. The results indicate that there is little formal evidence that these studies used procedures based upon literature-based research findings. Only two of the 34 studies examined included a citation in the Reference section to support the specific mail survey procedures that were being implemented. A number of other findings with respect to personalization and use of incentives are highlighted in this section.

It was found that the studies used a variety of procedures to enhance the personalization of the questionnaire. The questionnaire cover letters in particular often included personal addresses, the researchers ink signature, and were mailed in a personally addressed

envelope. However, 30% of the studies did not personally addressed the cover letter and more than 35% did not include the researcher's personal signature.

A number of empirically validated studies recommend personalization as an optional practice because it does not significantly increase the number of individuals who complete and return a mail survey (Dodd & Markwiese, 1987; Green & Stager, 1986; Rucker et al., 1984; Worthen & Valcarce, 1985). For example, response rates to surveys with hand-signed cover letters was not significantly different from those with photocopied signatures (Dodd & Markwiese, 1987). In contrast, other studies have found that when the returned questionnaires are examined the number of usable questionnaires is greater for those using hand-signed as opposed to photocopied signatures (Dodd & Markwiese, 1987). These authors suggest using personalized signatures in order to encourage potential nonrespondents to answer a few demographic questions, thereby reducing the size of the sample for which no information is known.

Another important finding was that prenotification procedures were used infrequently, thereby decreasing personalization. A possible explanation of this outcome is that only 12 of the 37 studies received extramural support. In such circumstances the additional outlay of hundreds of dollars for mailing a prenotification letter may have been prohibitive. However, the true cost of conducting a mail survey also should be evaluated against the resources required to conduct the

follow-up contacts needed to account for all participants and to obtain a representative, unbiased sample. The hidden cost of not including prenotification in a mail survey research design is that information with unknown generalizability characteristics is disseminated to the counseling profession. The fact that counseling survey studies have not attended to such critical methodological details makes them vulnerable to external validity criticisms. In an attempt to fully address external validity concerns, it is recommended that researchers systematically record and report all communication with their sample pool. Respondents may be provided with a minimal response option (e.g., completing demographic questions or even returning a blank questionnaire) so that the disposition of the original sample is complete. An additional suggestion, is that information be provided specifying the disposition of each individual included in the original sample pool.

Another procedural aspect of conducting mail surveys that merits attention is the type of postage used. Although commemorative stamps are generally considered to be an effective way to personalize a mail survey (Armstrong & Lusk, 1987), only 6.5% of the ICP studies used them. Since the cost of commemorative stamps is the same as regular postage stamps, there is little reason for researchers not to use them as a common practice, particularly with the sample sizes typically used in counseling research. Although preprinted business reply envelopes have some potential cost savings, it reduces

the personalization effect of the mail survey package.

In only two of the studies were tangible incentives used to encourage responses. One presumes this is primarily due to limited resources available to the researchers because incentives have been shown to increase response rates, although in complex ways. Simply offering individuals more valuable incentives does not proportionately increase response rates; that is, as the amount of the incentive increases its cost-effectiveness decreases. (Friedman & San Augustine, 1979; Hopkins & Podolak, 1983; Mizes, Fleece, & Roos, 1984). Importantly, incentives do not introduce bias into the sample and therefore have minimal effect on the representativeness of the respondent group (Mizes et al., 1984; Nederhof, 1983; Zusman & Duby, 1987). Monetary incentives are most effective when prepaid rather than promised, and are thought to be effective because they create dissonance which is reduced by completing and returning the survey (Dommeyer, 1985; Gajraj, Faria, & Dickinson, 1990; Zusman & Duby, 1987).

Other studies have reported complex relationships between the use of incentives and response rates. Nederhof (1983) conducted a study in which he reported that non-monetary incentives produced higher initial response rates than monetary incentives. When offered only with follow-up contacts, however, non-monetary incentives are less effective than monetary ones. Dommeyer (1985) also explored the impact of incentives on response rates: coins, personal check, money

order, sweepstakes, early-bird incentive, and no incentive. In contrast to Nederhoff (1983), he found that a coin incentive (such as including a 50¢ piece with the survey) was the most effective and easiest incentive to administer. He indicated that monetary incentives yield the greatest impact when used with the initial mailing, but are more cost effective when used only in the first follow-up mailing. The explanation for this finding is that respondents who are most inclined to respond will do so without an incentive being included with the initial mailing. In contrast, those who are less motivated to respond may be persuaded by the offer of an incentive accompanying the first follow-up contact.

The presentation or format of the questionnaires themselves can also have an impact on response rates. Lengthy, unattractive, or difficult questionnaires may communicate limited regard for respondents and create in them feeling of being taken advantage of. One of our initial interests in this investigation was to obtain copies of the original questionnaires used in mail surveys by counseling researchers and to evaluate their design and layout. Unfortunately, we were able to obtain copies of the original survey questionnaires for only 10 of the 37 studies. The quality ratings given to these 10 studies by independent evaluators for length, interest, design, and respect tone for respondent, were all in the slightly positive area of the rating scale. This is not an overtly negative finding, but this information must be considered with respect to fact that the questionnaires from these studies presumably represent the highest quality counseling mail

survey questionnaires. We had anticipated that they would receive more favorable ratings. In relation to this issue, Dommeyer (1988) emphasizes that more time and effort should be devoted to increase the presentation, attractiveness, and interest of questionnaires to make them more fun and rewarding for the respondents to complete; this should be done whether or not it increases response rate. With the increased availability of desktop publishing, it should be standard practice to carefully consider questionnaire layout and to have it evaluated prior to mailing the survey. Social Exchange Theory suggests that this should also done out of respect for the respondents. A final point is that because only 10 authors provided questionnaires, it is impossible to generalize findings about questionnaire quality to all counseling research. Nonetheless, it does point out the continuing need to provide archival access to all questionnaires used in mail survey studies.

A strength of the ICP studies was that a majority (57.3%) used two or three follow-up contacts. These contacts also occurred typically two to four weeks after the initial mailing of the questionnaire, which again suggests good practice. It should be noted, however, that almost one-half of the studies included a cut-off date for responding the questionnaire in the follow-up notification. Robin (1985) suggests that this is not the best practice because it conveys to the respondent a temporary relationship with the researcher. He proposes that when conducting follow-up contacts the goal should be to create an

impression in the respondent that there will be an unending succession of contacts until the survey is either completed or some form of minimal response is received. In addition, various forms of follow-up contact (mail, phone, electronic, etc.) have been found to maximize return rates (Martin et al., 1989).

A primary purpose for carefully considering the procedures used when conducting mail surveys is to increase the final usable response rate and to ensure that sampling bias is minimized. The results of this study with respect to the final useable response rates of the JCP studies is therefore of primary importance. Many of the studies had adequate response rates, but 43.5% had fewer than 50% of the respondents return usable questionnaires. The fact that some studies with less the 40% response rates were published indicates that there is some variability in the criteria used by reviewers to evaluate mail survey studies. Although the median response rate of 63.7% provides a defacto guideline for counseling researchers, other factors need to be considered when examining response rate. In addition to examining the size of the response rate, it is important that researchers carefully document all of the procedures used to account for each and every questionnaire originally mailed. Current practice is to report only the final useable response rate. Counseling researchers might also consider regularly reporting the number of unusable returns, the number of overt refusals, the number who did not respond, and the number who were not located. In addition, any other unusual circumstances that

affected the final response rate should be reported. What is perhaps most critical in conducting mail surveys is not necessarily following a preset methodological script as laid out in the Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978) (although a researcher might elect to do just that), but to thoroughly explain the procedures used and to provide a rationale for the choices made.

According to Linsky (1975) the most successful techniques to improve response rate are those that emphasize mechanical and perceptual factors, have broad motivational appeal, and direct motivational factors in the form of incentives. It is important to point out that the ultimate objective of using incentives is to increase response rates and the representativeness of the sample. Martin et al. (1989) suggest that researchers should be concerned about the representativeness of their sample, the quality of responses, and the cost effectiveness of inducement techniques. These are issues that counseling researchers have almost universally ignored.

Researchers also need to examine the theory base they use for making an appeal for cooperation from the respondents (Lockhart, 1984). For example, in this study, prior to designing the mechanics of the mail survey, we decided that our appeal to the ICP authors would be based upon Social Exchange Theory. We perceived our relationship with these authors as one of colleagues sharing and exchanging information that would hopefully be of mutual benefit. Therefore, we drafted the cover letter and designed the questionnaire with an

emphasis on communicating to the authors the regard and respect we had for them and the appreciation we felt for their willingness to more closely examine their creative work.

In our opinion, mail survey research is a reciprocal relationship. When researchers distribute a mail survey they enter into a mutually respectful relationship with the respondent, and as such, efforts should be made to give back to each respondent as much as the respondent has given to them. Along these lines, Dommeyer (1985) argues that researchers are ethically obligated to share the results of their studies with the respondents. Treating respondents with such respect has the associated effect of increasing positive relationships between researchers and the samples they use. This could have a long term impact on how individuals respond to mail surveys they receive in the future. The results of this study indicate that counseling researchers need to continue to incorporate empirically-based mail survey methods into studies, thereby enhancing the internal and external validity of their studies.

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Footnotes

[1] A reference list of the Journal of Counseling Psychology mail survey studies published between 1980-89 is available upon request.

Table 1

Characteristics of 34 Mail Survey Studies Published in the Journal of Counseling Psychology during 1980-1989.

Study Characteristic	
Prenotification	
None	57.5%
Letter	27.2%
Postcard	3.0%
Face-to-Face	3.0%
Personalization of Cover Letter	
None	15.2%
Individually addressed	72.7%
Personalized ink signature	66.7%
Individually typed	33.3%
Cover Letter Appeal	
None	3.0%
Statement of anonymity	78.7%
Statement of confidentiality	69.6%
University sponsorship	45.5%
Use of cutoff return date	30.3%
Minimal Response Requested	
None	88.2%

Return blank questionnaire	12.1%
Questionnaire Topic	
Miscellaneous	36.3%
Career counseling	21.2%
Supervision	18.1%
Cross-cultural counseling	12.1%
Stress and anxiety issues	12.1%
Dimensions of Paper used in Questionnaire	
8.5 X 11-inch	84.8%
11 X 17-inch	3.0%
5 X 8-inch	3.0%
4.25 X 5.5-inch	3.0%
Color of Paper Used in Questionnaire	
White	69.6%
Multicolored	21.2%
Yellow	9.9%
Green	3.0%
Length of Questionnaire	
1-3 pages	15.1%
4-6 pages	48.4%
7 + pages	27.3%
Number of Follow-ups	
None	12.1%
One	27.3%

Two	45.5%
Three	15.2%
Type of Follow-ups	
Mailed a letter	45.5%
Mailed another questionnaire	42.5%
Personal phone call	39.4%
Mailed a postcard	33.3%
Face-to-face contact	6.0%
Other (e.g., mail gram)	9.9%
Timing of Follow-up Contacts	
One week	9.9%
Two weeks	36.4%
One month	27.3%
Other	15.1%
Postage and Mailing of Questionnaire	
Regular postage stamp	39.4%
Metered mail	24.2%
Bulk mail	15.1%
Commemorative postage stamp	6.0%
Postage stamp on envelope	45.5%
Business rely envelope	42.4%
Use of Incentives	
None	81.8%
Send copy of results	18.2%

Monetary	3.0%
Lottery	3.0%
Size of Original Sample	
1-100	15.2%
101-199	15.2%
200-499	27.3%
500-999	24.2%
1000-1999	15.2%
Final Usable Response Rate	
20%-39%	9.9%
40%-49%	15.2%
50%-59%	15.2%
60%-69%	24.2%
70%-79%	30.3%
80%+	3.0%